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ABSTRACT

The way in which parents develop perceptions and relationships for functioning in a family leadership role is discussed. Topics addressed include: (1) beginning with selfhood; (2) relating to others; (3) relating to parenting; and (4) relating to vocation. The most extensive discussion is that of relating to others, which explores four relationship patterns that can help one to nurture a sense of mutuality with others: spending time with others, having high regard for others, "listening to their needs," and building a sense of vocation with others. Parenting can be filled with the meaning of vocation only when parents have a good sense of their identity, a positive image of themselves, growing relationships with others, a sense of parenting as vocation, and a belief in the mission of decency that parenting embraces. (RH)

PARENTING DURING THE EARLY YEARS: A FOUNDATION FOR RELATIONSHIPS

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The 1980's and the 1990's may well be remembered as the time when parenting was reinvented as well as studied more than any other social phenomena. Ten years from now we will look back with amazement at the changes parents had to negotiate for successful family living . Many of us will be a part of the parenting process over the next decade; either as parents or helpers of parents. We will experience first hand the joys and stress of building and nurturing families. Whether in the past tense or in a futuristic sense some of us ask the question of how we might do a better job of parenting?

Regardless of our varying contexts and situations, there is one facet of parenting that is common to everyone's adventure with this experience: **RELATIONSHIPS**. Whether a single parent, a part of a more traditionl parenting alliance, or engaged in some other style of parenting, relationships permeate every aspect of our lives. The people in our "intimate lives" (marriage, family, work) as well as people more distanced from us influence and are influenced by the ways we relate to life. In particular our parenting relationshps have a major influence on the social

fabric of the community.

The realization that parenting is so vital to the "health" of the society has prompted considerable study of this process and many suggestions on how parents can be more effective than in past generations. The most promising finding of these studies (Fraiberg, 1988; Satir, 1988) is that parents can strengthen their parenting position without having access to any kit of magic. The "heart" of becoming and renewing one's strength as a parent is in relationships. Relationships are based on how we "see" people, ourselves as individuals, our significant others, our children, and the people of our "history"--namely our parents and the memories of our childhoods. It is a composite of our perceptions of these people and events that we use as the basis for our relationships. The remainder of this presentation will focus on how parents develop their perceptions and relationships for then functioning in a family leadership role.

Beginning With Selfhood

Above all else successful parenting requires that the adults involved have a positive and growing sense of "selfhood". This is not an impossible task if we keep our focus on the "growth" aspect of the "becoming person". It requires that we understand how we develop our selfhood and that we be committed to building our selfhood in positive directions.

The "self" is a composite of all that happens to a particular individual and how that person integrates these happenings into their life context. Personality, heredity, early affective

experiences, adult encounters, and many related experiences combine to influence the evolution of "self". Just as important is how each person views their "self" and the events that influenced them; past, present, and future (Satir, 1988).

In some cases people choose to "accept" negative experiences as inhibiting their growth; yet others choose to use these experiences as "points of beginning" for self-growth. The point that research makes is that we have a choice with regards to how relate to our life experiences. Of course a major influence on how we "choose" to perceive our experiences is the treatment we receive (or received) from significant others (Langer, 1983). Individuals who see themselves as a "positive" in life, believe in learning from their experiences, have a nurturing and realistic sense of their identity, and are active in refining their "self" in positive directions, have achieved a needed benchmark for successful parenting during the early years (Swick, 1987).

The work of Fraiberg (1988) brings the importance of having a strong and secure sense of self to its fullest meaning. In her studies of mothers who were detached from their infants (and in some cases abusive to them) she found that inevitably the mothers had tremendous insecurity and severely distorted and negative self images. Often these mothers had experienced "abuse" in their immediate or past lives and saw themselves as "weak", "incompetent", and/or "victimized". In contrast, Fraiberg describes healthy mothering as symbolic of adults who

are secure, nurturing, and who see themselves as loveable and capable of loving others. These same patterns of self image development occur in men. Parent behaviors such as constantly rushing feeding times, rigidly scheduling the toddler's daily life, and constantly conveying negative messages to children, reflect the low self esteem of the person in the parenting role (Swick, 1988).

Knowing that our imperfections can be a source of learning for future growth and that they are a part of "who we are" is integral to having a secure and positive sense of selfhood. Realizing the nature of the "self" as it has developed over one's life and understanding the importance of focusing on the positives of that self are initial points for constructing and renewing a positive self image. Every adult can recall "negatives" of the past and present; in some cases such memories may prompt panic in persons. Yet research shows that people who develop a positive orientation toward self use these "negatives" as bridges to new growth.

The "celebration of self" in sharing one's talents as well as needs with a new human being requires the security of "accepting that self" with the full realization that perfection is ever beyond the reach of today. It is in the reaching for growth in one's self that assures the positive development of parenting skills in each human being.

Relating To Others

Parenting (especially during the early years) requires the experiencing of intense and pervasive relationships. Not only do we relate to many new people but our relationships with current and past intimates changes in dramatic ways. Ellen Galinsky (1987) correctly observes that "becoming a parent" during the early years involves as much change in life functioning as any other life process. Clearly, we need to understand and reflect on how our relationships influence and are influenced by this intense role called parenting. This need for insight into our self-other dynamics is especially important relative to our close intimates.

Marital and close friendship dynamics as well as extended-family relationships strongly influence the "selfhood" of parents (Bettelheim, 1988). How we see and relate to these significant others is critical in our endeavor to become healthy parents. Pervasive and intense negative "relationship stressors" can erode the integrity of adults who are parenting: especially those who are engaged in this role for the first time. Constant feuding, continuous criticism, intense cynicism, and on-going "confrontations" among spouses and/or other intimates drains our self of needed spiritual energy for responding to the challenges of parenting. Nick Stinnett's (1984) work on healthy families found that harmony and supportive relationships among spouses (and spouse-friend in the case of single parents) were the distinguishing features of the parents in these families.

Adults who are at "war" with each other are unable to engage in healthy family endeavors.

Seeing others' strengths, putting past inadequacies into a growth context, nurturing "warm" interactions, and fostering supportive experiences are proven ways to build the foundation for successful parenting (Fraiberg, 1988). Even in cases where relationships have become destroyed research shows that using a healing, sensitive, and empathetic approach to overcoming the "hurt" and "anger" of such experiences is facilitative of moving towards more positive life perspectives (Stinnett, 1984). Part of our responsibility in relationships is establishing some common ground with regards to expectations and to actual involvement with each other. "Troubled families" often expect too much of each other (and are to rigid in what they accept from each other) and thus become easily disenchanted with the outcomes. Or, they expect too little from each other and thus initite a pattern of pathological dependence on one or two members of the family (Satir, 1988).

Leaving individuals "room" to be themselves and positively responding to their regard for and support of us are possibly the most powerful forces at work in the evolution of positive parenting. As Satir (1988) notes people who are loved, trusted, and treated with high regard are very open to change and to engaging in helping relationships with others. Yet there are few live human beings who are always loveable; most of us need help in realizing our talent for loving. This need for becoming

capable at sharing and loving in new and unique ways as a parent is best nurtured in seeking harmonious relationships with others.

Four "relationship patterns" that can nurture this sense of mutuality with others are: spending time with others, having high regard for others, listening to the "needs" of others, and building a sense of "vocation" with others. People who spend time together at least have an opportunity to relate to each others' needs and at best can support each others' growth. Just being near others does not assure meaningful interactions; yet research (Satir, 1988) suggests that people who do not spend time interacting with each other tend to become isolated from their common "meanings". Parenting during the early years requires that people "plan" to have the needed time for adult relationships while also spending intense and continuous time with the child.

The failure to "have time" with the significant people in our lives can destroy the fabric of these relationships. It is in our "time together" that we can learn about each others' strengths, establish some common interests in our personal and parenting lives, become partners in pursuing family and individual development, and strengthen the emotional bonds that comprise our relationships.

While spending time together is a vital beginning to relationship building, the substance of this process needs to be in the direction of supportive interactions. Interpersonal support promotes "bonding" among people because they can feel and sense the support of another human being. It is with the **supportive involvement** of others that we solve problems, make it through stressful life experiences, and acquire pride in our achievements. Since parenting during the early years is so intense it is essential that we have supportive spouses and friends. More than anything else "support" strengthens our image of our self as a worthy person and opens our being to sharing and helping others. A mutual appreciation of our common needs and challenges emerges from such supportive involvements; we can share information and experiences as well as explore our caring roles with each other. Parenting is so full of vulnerability that the psychological and spiritual support we gain from loving relationships acts as a source of energy for loving our children (Bettleheim, 1988).

Our relationships with important others need to reflect our **high regard for them.** Cynicism, negativism, and pessimism are the enemies of healthy relationships. In contrast, high regard says I value your integrity and am secure enough to share in that integrity. High regard is shown in many ways: relating to anothers' achievements, empathizing with others difficulties, helping others deal with problems, and affirming the "goodness" of others in spites of their human frailties. Parents of young

children need to "feel" high regard for each other. It is the bonding force of any relationship; knowing that a special person in your life holds you in high esteem adds to your wellness (Langer, 1983).

Yet high regard for others is not founded on unrealistic expectations; it must be based on a faith that we can support each others' development as persons and as parents. It is a concept that allows for us to see the "best" in each other and yet realize we are human beings. Satir (1988) notes that people who recognize the specialness in their signifcant others tend to engage in a great deal of "nurturing relationships" with them. If we are nurturing of each other we are likely to carry over this pattern of living to our interactions with young children. Considerateness, compassion, sensitivity, patience, humor, and warmth are attributes common in relationships where high regard exists.

The significant people in our lives place great trust in us because they have faith in our **listening to their needs.** Edward Hall (1984) describes the relationship process as one in which the individuals involved perform a symbolic dance; in tune with each others' thoughts and feelings and yet respectful of each others' sense of privacy and individuality. "Listening" in an active way is the key to having a successful "dance". For example, it has been noted that when fathers are highly supportive (listening) of their wives during the birthing process, the mothers are more involved in the process and more

alert to the baby's needs (Nichols, 1988). It has also been noted by Swick (1987) that strong parental relationships are characterized by continuous active-listening. This listening process is inclusive of daily communication, planned and spontaneous intimacy, and the mutual sense of "we are a team". Adapting work schedules, altering socialization habits, and re-thinking one's roles in life are a few examples of how parents carry out this listening process.

Through being together in meaningful ways people form the mosaic for "vocationing". I use the action word "vocationing" to emphasize that vocations like parenting are life-long. Through listening, supporting, and caring the spiritual beginnings of "parenting as vocation" are set in place in an artistic and yet intentional manner. Swick (1989) provides us with the central theme of this process:

> *A significant part of the parents' role is self-insight on their spiritual status. Part of this process involves parents in "imaging" themselves as family leaders; people who are about the task of building a covenant with their past and future through nurturing children and each other.*

Relating To Parenting

In the development of personal and marital/friendship bonds comes the strength to "image" ourselves as parents. Only recently have we realized the need for parents (especially first-time parents) to relate to their concept and "image" of parenting (Galinsky, 1987). During the initial period of becoming parents we unconsciously or consciously "rehearse" the roles that we will soon perform. We do this in our minds and through dialogue with others: reflecting on how we were parented; surveying how our friends parent; imagining how we might parent; and possibly acquiring information on parenting. These initial "images" of parenting serve to guide us as we begin this process; later, as we grow and our children grow, we will change and refine these images. **It is important thought that from our beginning experience with parenting we see ourselves as capable of this endeavor.** Not capable of perfection but able to respond to the many experiences we will have as parents.

We can orient our early parenting images toward the positive. Seeing past problems as experiences that help us become more nurturing is one way of achieving this. Taking note of specific feelings we have about becoming a parent is yet another dimension of this process. The more we imagine being healthy parents the more likely we are to actualize this image.

At the "heart" of the parenting process is nurturing. The birth of a new child will support our feelings of nurturance and

we should build from this beginning by making sure we are taking time to experience the depth and tenderness of this part of ourselves. Not only should we nurture our children but ourselves and our intimates too! The period from birth-2years should be filled with the gentleness and love that are needed for family bonding. As new parents we go through so many changes that the nurturance and mutual trust-building that occur in loving human relationships are essential to our harmony and spiritual growth.

There are some things we can do to foster this nurturing process: reflect on recent experiences where we were nurturing toward others; recognize the warmth in our spouse or intimate friend; imagine ourselves as warm and supportive parents; share our fears and concerns about being a parent with close intimates; and spend some time each day taking note of our strengths.

There is another central element to imaging ourselves in the parenting role: that of being a **guide and designer** of experiences for our children. Through nurturance we construct the emotional substance necessary for parenting and family life. Through guidance we establish the structure by which children and us can grow in meaningful ways. In this role we need to reflect on how we live; our daily schedules, how and where we spend our time, and the things we give priority too. In our "image" of parenting do we see ourselves as role models for children? Are we recognizing the role we play in differentiating our development from that of our children; that is, that we are in

charge of providing leadership for the family. Nurturance needs the balance of insightful, guiding adults. Beginning with helping children solve their "biting problem" we have to "image" ourselves as guides who point a direction toward acceptable behavior while "nurturing" the child as he or she struggles with resolving these developmental milestones.

Here are some examples of guidance issues we need to include in our "imaging" of ourselves as parents: to provide clear and appropriate expectations in a nurturing manner (not expecting a two year old to act like a ten year old); designing a "family" schedule that is reasonable for achieving the demands of the particular stage of life we are experiencing (for example, allowing for plenty of time with our infant); establishing some form of a teaming alliance with my spouse or a close intimate to deal with the heavy demands of parenting; and developing a perception of self-as-problem-solver (not seeing parenting as having answers as much as learning how to relate to life in a dynamic and growing manner).

How parents see themselves as they engage in nurturing and guiding children's development is the spiritual force of healthy parenting. In effect, they must nurture and guide each other as adults who are in love with life; committed to the vocation of highest regard: parenting.

Relating To Vocation:

Perhaps the most symbolic process of our lives is the loss of a sense of vocation. Our hectic and complex society promotes so

much change that to commit to any activity for a lifetime is not only threatening but overwhelming. The magnet of social popularity has drawn many young parents away from their role of parenting as vocation. With no time to think about one's role as parent one need not fully commit to actualizing it. Putting "parenting" into a "vocational context" enables us to make sense out of otherwise confusing experiences and to "reframe" our way of relating to the challenges and changes we will or have experienced (Swick, 1989a). Being engaged in a vocation implies that we have a long-range mission that is intentional and mindfully designed. In the case of parenting it means this mission is a faithful endeavor that is approached as a learning experience (Fowler, 1981).

Parenting takes on more significance, substance, and validity when perceived in a vocational context. In this context, we have a solid symbol by which to relate to the challenges and joys of parenting. In this sense, the many things we do as parents (feeding , loving, solving problems, and so on) are related to a mission where we commit ourselves to building a trustworthy environment for others. It is being willing to fully sponsor another human being; supporting and guiding their healthy emergence as a decent and loving person. To undertake this awesome challenge of "sponsorship", parents must have a sense of their personal essence; their goodness, value, and growingness. With these insights then parents can see and act on life experiences such as illness for work problems with a faith

that whatever experiences that occur they can be used as a means of growth.

Relating to "parenting as a vocation" can be the symbolic structure we use to help guide our actions. For example, from this perspective we can better grasp why we change our relationship pattern with the arrival of a child. It also enables us to project new ways of functioning; spending time together discussing our needs as family leaders, designing new ways of teaming to meet new schedule demands, and learning to listen in new ways so as to strengthen our parenting/friendship bonds. This new way of thinking about parenting takes us far beyond the current custodial mentality to a more enlightened vision that focuses on the spiritual mission of "nurturing family".

In a context of vocation, we should see ourselves as "spiritual leaders" of the family. In effect we become teachers and caregivers; modeling and guiding each other toward positive involvements with life. The **vocation of parenting** contains many seeds: establishing a secure and loving environment, sharing one's self intensely and intimately, protecting our children from abuse, projecting for others an enlightened view of faithful living, and engaging in growth experiences through family living. It is through "trust building" and the fostering of "mutuality" that parents support the full development of children and themselves (Swick, 1989a).

Parents provide leadership in many ways. At the outset, **modeling** is our most powerful teaching role. To model is to

guide children and ourselves toward being nurturing and caring persons. It begins with marital and friendship bonds and extends to parent-infant attachment and further toward a family embrace that secures us in our positive identities as faithful people. The warmth, care, and support that is shared in healthy families serves as a source of spiritual meaning.

Being a parent is much more than simply being with children; it is indeed a life-long mission that is hopefully filled with the meaning of vocation. This can only occur when people have a good sense of their identity, a positive image of themselves, growing relationships with others, a sense of parenting as vocation, and a belief in the mission of decency that parenting embraces.

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